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ABSTRACT

To consider Frederick Douglass as an autobiographer, it is useful to examine each of his three autobiographical texts with a view to drawing some conclusion about their relation to one another, and about the relation of the author to each one. It seems likely that the shifting of Douglass' narrative stance is an index of his intellectual development and of his understanding of himself in relation to the larger society. The first autobiography, "The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave, Written by Himself," commonly acknowledged as the best of the slave narrative genre, transcends the conventional form of the slave narrative and is the product of an exceptional mind whose very literacy is an act of rebellion. "My Bondage and My Freedom," the second autobiography, analyzing and reviewing the experience of the "Narrative," represents the assumption by Douglass of a rebellious literate posture which enables him to reject the strictures (urged upon him by white abolitionists) of the earlier formal genre. The third autobiography, "The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass," considered by many to be a literary failure, is a manipulation of already existing texts. It reveals Douglass grappling in old age with the problem of documenting his place and presence in a changed world, where the cause which had initially impelled him to literacy and to freedom had disappeared. (Sixteen references are attached.) (SR)

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NARRATIVE STANCE IN THE DOUGLASS AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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NARRATIVE STANCE IN THE DOUGLASS AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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If one is to consider Frederick Douglass as an autobiographer, simple common sense demands an examination of each of his three autobiographical texts with a view to drawing some conclusion about their relation to one another, and about the relation of the author to each one. It is not enough merely to pass judgment on the disparity of literary technique in the three documents, nor is it entirely fair to dignify by careful consideration and strong comparative reading only the first two. What is needed is a seriatim consideration of the three autobiographies which delineate the genesis and evolution of Frederick Douglass as a writer. It seems likely that the shifting of Douglass's narrative stance (the locus at which he positions himself relative to the text and to the society at large), is an index of his intellectual development and of his understanding of himself in relation to the larger society. With this in mind, it becomes important to approach his texts in terms of their structures and strategies, as these reveal the moment in the life of the author and his understanding of that moment as it unfolds on the page.

The first Douglass autobiography, The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave, Written by Himself, is commonly acknowledged as the best of the slave narrative genre. Because of this, it is important to understand that genre as a polemic indictment of chattel slavery. According to Bruce Franklin, such narratives were

accurately perceived as a threat to the entire system of slavery.

Those who defended slavery argued that

Negroes were happy to be slaves. Every escaped slave was a refutation of that argument. Another defense of slavery, one underlying the first, was that Negroes were not thinking human beings. Every author of a slave narrative was a refutation of that argument. And if the slave narrative could transcend the literature being published by the apologists for slavery, it would embody even more radical implications - about human relations among the social classes. (Franklin, 28)

As James Olney points out, the genre produced a tremendous volume of lengthy texts which exhibit a profound sameness. This may grow from the fact that, although the role of blacks in the anti-slavery movement was generally accepted, it was also rigidly and narrowly defined.

(Matlack, 16) Thus, as a speaker, Douglass was urged by his Garrisonian mentors to narrate, but not to comment upon, his experience of slavery. These same mentors, in an effort to make Douglass as credible as possible to his white audience, also urged him to keep "a little. . .plantation speech." Olney's analysis of the narrator's closely defined role is illuminating.

The writer of a slave narrative finds himself in an irresolvably tight double bind as a result of the very premise and intention of his narrative, which is to give a picture of slavery 'as it is.' Thus it is the writer's claim. . .that he is not emplotting, he is not fictionalizing, and he is not performing any act of poesis (a shaping, making). . .the ex-slave narrator is debarred from use of a memory that would make of his narrative [something beyond]. . .the purely, merely episodic. (48) Thus, the narrator cannot openly employ the imaginative faculty of

memory. He is perforce locked into a rigidly limiting episodic format with its own inflexible conventions. Olney offers a master plan for the slave narrative which encompasses each of its formal features. These range from the framing conventions of the engraved portrait of

the narrator, followed by testimonials by whites of publicly accepted veracity, to the appendix of documentary material to the text itself. The text, invariably, begins with "I was born. . ." or some variant of that statement, and proceeds through the failed escape attempt on to the escape made good. It was to this highly codified form that Douglass brought his experience as an escaped slave; and it was this form which he used to good advantage in creating an effective abolitionist document.

This abolitionist document constitutes, in effect, the public aspect of the narrative, but it has a private or personal aspect as well, in which Douglass exercises the act of poesis by constructing himself through the reconstruction of past events. As Donald Gibson has suggested, one of the most remarkable features of the text is the fact that Douglass was able to reconcile the public and private aspects of his text without violating the form he employed. The constructed self, which may be defined as the discernible product of Douglass's narrative stance, shifts within the texts of the succeeding autobiographies, revealing some remarkable intellectual reaches on the author's part and becoming, in Olney's words, a self "both single and various." ("Auto*Bios*Graphein," 123)

The opening passages of the three autobiographies demonstrate the intellectual odyssey of the writer, beginning with his early dependence on, later independence from, and final rejection of the formal conventions Olney has detailed. The Narrative does in fact begin "I was born," and continues in its first paragraph to detail his birthplace as Tuckahoe, to state that like most slaves Douglass does

not know his age or birth date, and to contrast his condition with the condition of white children. Douglass, by virtue of first person, is at the structural center of his text.

I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot County, Maryland. I have no authentic record of my age, never having seen any authentic record of it. (Nar. 1)

The two subsequent versions of this beginning, however, are quite different. Both of the later versions suggest that Douglass has chosen to position himself some distance from the center of his text, in order to evaluate what he narrates. Significantly, the emphasis has shifted from the factual naming of the place (although this information is still given), to the condition of the place and its populace.

In Talbot county Eastern Shore, Maryland, near Easton, the county town of that county, there is a small district of country, thinly populated, and remarkable for nothing that I know of more than for the worn out, sandy, desert like appearance of its soil, the general dilapidation of its farms and fences, the indigent and spiritless character of its inhabitants, and the prevalence of ague and fever. (My Bondage, 3)

Here, in an opening the rings like a much told tale, the slave child is not even visible, but Douglass's interpretive language ("worn out," or "desert like") manifests a degree of subtlety missing in the original "I was born" beginning. To be certain, convention is still at work, but Douglass has opted out of the slave narrative format (initially the only vehicle accessible to him) in an effort to retell his tale with a new voice. By interpreting the landscape and its inhabitants, as any good teller of stories is likely to do, he predisposes his audience to see the story's central figure in a setting of such desolation as simple, episodic narrative might not suggest. If contemporary taste

requires a degree of starkness in textual rhetoric, this does not alter the fact that Douglass's nineteenth century audience had rather more florid tastes, and that the revision offers a glimpse of Douglass assuming a voice more suited to the educated white of his time.

In The Life and Times, a sort of synthesis of the two earlier versions emerges;

In Talbot County, Eastern Shore, State of Maryland, near Easton, the county town, there is a small district of country, thinly populated, and remarkable for nothing that I know of more than for the worn-out, sandy, desertlike appearance of its soil, the general dilapidation of its farms and fences, and the indigent and spiritless character of its inhabitants, and the prevalence of ague and fever. It was in this dull, flat, and unthrifty district or neighborhood, . . . surrounded by a white population of the lowest order, indolent and drunken to a proverb, and among slaves who, in point of ignorance and indolence, were fully in accord with their surroundings, that I, without any fault of my own, was born. . . ." (Life and Times, 27)

Here, the child is placed in the desolate landscape and both the white and black populations are scathingly judged. The convention of place naming is used somewhat differently than it was in My Bondage, where it established and documented the setting. In Life and Times, it is the necessary preliminary to a voiced judgment passed by a writer who has recognized his own alienation from both populations as well as from the place, and who has so shaped his life (in action and in text) as to remove himself as completely as possible from all three. If there is a suggestion of bitterness, there is also a suggestion of wry understanding that is new.

Even the titles of the Douglass autobiographies demonstrate of the "various" quality of his constructed self as it is narrated. The title Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written

by Himself, is perhaps more edifying than was intended by its author. It clearly identifies the genre of the text, and assumes a sort of spurious objective authority by its use of the third person. The disclaimer, "written by himself," while part of the operative convention in titling narratives, is also a trifle uneasy, bordering narrowly on a venture into first person which asserts the real, personal identity of the writer. It serves as a reminder that Douglass, "once considered an animal, even by himself," is writing for an audience that remains "unconvinced that he is in fact a fellow human being." (Franklin, 33)

By contrast, the assertive first person of My Bondage and My Freedom suggests a writer who is no longer entirely at the service of generic conventions, who is secure in his own literacy, who insist on speaking in his own voice, and who will eschew polemic in favor of a more balanced analysis of his life. The return to third person in the title of The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass suggests not a regression to the conventional construction of the Narrative title, but a further shift to a historical and documentary vision which no longer requires a "written by himself" disclaimer. It is a vision which may be exercised from a position of eminence roughly equivalent to the position which Douglass had achieved in public life. The apologetic quality of "written by himself" is completely absent.

The "various" nature of the self is further demonstrated by the different way in which the same event is presented in Douglass's autobiographies. The occasion of Douglass's resistance to the "negro-breaker," Covey occupies roughly a page and a half of the Narrative,

where Douglass reveals great skill in pacing his narration. He relates his own actions in the fight without undue embellishment or speculation on Covey's thinking. Of his resistance to this master Douglass writes "from whence came the spirit I do not know - I resolved to fight." (80) He then describes the scene with a startling lack of background detail. The thoughts of each man, the physical setting of the struggle, are both subsumed by the action of one man's flesh on another's. Thus, the following passage is as notable for the omitted background and dialogue as it is for what is given in the text.

. . .Mr Covey entered the stable with a long rope; and just as I was half out of the loft, he caught hold of my legs, and was about tying me. As soon as I found what he was up to, I gave a sudden spring, and as I did so, he holding to my legs, I was brought sprawling to the stable floor. Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment - from whence came the spirit I don't know - I resolved to fight; and suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose. He held on to me, and I to him. My resistance was so entirely unexpected, that Covey seemed all taken aback. He trembled like a leaf. This gave me assurance, and I held him uneasy, causing the blood to run where I touched him with the end of my fingers. (80)

Only the trenchant, and necessary, comment on motivation ("Mr. Covey seemed now. . ." or "Covey seemed taken all aback") intervenes in the sequence of action and reaction between the two men. The reflection that "This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave" (81) does not even appear until the subsequent paragraph.

By contrast, the same incident in My Bondage and My Freedom occupies four and three quarters pages, and suffers from what might be called dramatic overwriting. Instead of simply entering the stable with a long rope, as he does in the Narrative, Covey sneaks "into the stable, in his peculiar snake-like way. . ." Instead of the narrator "brought

sprawling to the floor" (Narrative, 80), the reader finds "he brought me to the stable floor, giving my newly mended jaw a fearful jar." (My Bondage, 242) Curiously, in My Bondage and My Freedom, Douglass inserts into the narration a remembrance of an earlier "pledge to stand up and fight." (242) which, far from being an amplification of the earlier version, contradicts it. Additionally, Douglass places some mild invective, "You scoundrel" (243) in Covey's mouth, and completely deletes the sentence containing "I held him uneasy. . ." (Narrative, 80) from the text. It is replaced by the more comic journey of the fight into the cow yard, where Covey is besmirched with manure and events are complicated by the introduction of another character, the slave Caroline, who is altogether absent in the first version. A representative sample of the text reveals Douglass as having shifted his narrative stance. Here, the intellectual expansion of the text suggests that Douglass is trying to convey to the reader that even while in Covey's hands, he had begun to see at least his emotional and intellectual life as not entirely circumscribed by slavery, while the earlier version has his rebellion coming as an abrupt surprise even to himself.

As soon as I found what he was up to, I gave a sudden spring, (my two days rest had been of much service to me,) and by that means, no doubt, he was able to bring me to the floor so heavily. He was defeated in his plan of tying me. While down, he seemed to think he had me very securely in his power. He little thought he was - as the rowdies say - 'in' for a 'rough and tumble' fight; but such was the fact. Whence came the daring spirit necessary to grapple with a man who, eight-and-forty hours before, could, with his slightest word have made me tremble like a leaf in a storm, I do not know; at any rate, I was resolved to fight, and what was better still, I was actually hard at it. The fighting madness had come upon me and I found my fingers attached to the throat of my cowardly

tormentor; as heedless of consequences, at the moment, as though we stood as equals before the law. The very color of the man was forgotten. (242)

Stark episodic narration has given way to a new mode of expression.

The last version, in The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, is a pared down rendition of the My Bondage text in which "snake-like" becomes "peculiar" and which otherwise attempts to combine the high points of the two earlier versions. Here Douglass finds "my strong fingers attached to the throat of the tyrant. . .heedless of consequence" (140) without ever mentioning the blood drawn by his hold, which seems no longer so uneasy. What the third revision apparently tries to do is to tighten up the second text while allowing Douglass the right to comment and denounce which he had annexed with My Bondage and My Freedom. The narration of the Covey incident in My Bondage is substantially the same as the narration in Life and Times except that the last version has the gloss of a story produced by the combining of texts rather than the bite of a story with which the writer is still actively engaged on an emotional level while he structures and re-structures events.

Of the three versions of Douglass's autobiography in print, the most arresting is the first, but the other two have in common the de-fusing of the terror of the situation which allows Douglass to judge the occurrence even while he narrates it. This suggests that Douglass, in the first version, was portraying a terrible experience in some sense not resolved, and that in the second version he was employing heavily loaded rhetoric in order to relate to his audience the significant lessons he felt were a necessary adjunct to the experience. By the

time of the third revision, it may even have seemed to him that the first version had lost its relevance to the post bellum nation. Whatever the reason, Douglass seems curiously absent from his own text in the third instance. His function has apparently become more editorial than authorial.

According to James Matlack, there are two components to the making of a man in the slave narrative; literacy and resistance. (21) The Douglass Narrative is deeply and overtly concerned with both. In the Narrative Douglass first addresses the issue of literacy by describing his first period of residence in Baltimore. There, his mistress engaged to teach him to read until forbidden by her husband to continue.

He forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. . .if you give a nigger an inch he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master - to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world.'" (Narrative, 47)

By surmounting this obstacle to his education, Douglass achieves what Eric Sundquist has called a "self-fathering literacy" (113) in which the author of narrative becomes his own father, the "author" of his situation as profoundly as his owner had been in the past. When Douglass "subscribes" himself at the Narrative's close, he is engaged in underwriting "his identity and very being" ("I Was Born," 54) in a remarkably literal sense. The slave narrative, however, was a genre shaped largely by the expectations of its white audience. Inescapably, part of what Douglass underwrites is an identity forged for him by his white mentors.

The famous advice given to Douglass by John Collins, George Foster, and William Lloyd Garrison on the lecture platform, to keep "a little plantation speech," to "stick to the facts," and to "leave the philosophy to us" is a good analogy for the editorial censorship built into the fixed form of the slave narrative. Thus, Douglass's efforts to "refute accusations that his story was not authentic and to seize power over it at the same time" (Sundquist, 109) are to some degree undercut by the fact that he was writing in the specific and often dramatic genre of slave narrative.

The physical brutalization suffered by slaves is, even more than the denial of literacy, the issue which gives rise to the dramatic resistance visible in the Narrative. Douglass was able to contravene by stealth Auld's order to keep him illiterate. Covey's efforts to beat him, however, required a very different sort of posture. The specific instance which focuses the reader's attention on resistance is, of course, Douglass's desperate refusal to let Covey beat him. The control exercised by Douglass in dealing with Covey, demonstrated by his refusal to strangle or batter his adversary, is very like the control that Douglass the writer exercises over his text, allowing the reader to see only what is needful and without violating the conventions of the genre. For the space of his struggle with Covey, Douglass has seized the power of life and death over his master, but uses it only to resist Covey's abuse.

This element of what Goldstein calls "physical self assertion" (6) is essential alike to the narrative and to the man; or at least to the narrated self Douglass is creating. As Donald Gibson puts it, Douglass

gains a victory "not because he beats Covey, but because he thwarts Covey's intent to beat him." (562)

This is perhaps a curious victory, given that Douglass had "resolved to fight" and that he was writing for a white audience whose moral position required "that the slave defeat the slaveholder." (Gibson, 562) To defeat the slaveholder too vengefully, however, would be to risk alienating the white audience essential to Douglass's undertaking. That Douglass did not alienate his audience may have been partly a function of the fixed narrative form on which experience could be settled.

The narrative voice of the first autobiography, which for the most part cultivates a stark simplicity, is replaced in My Bondage and My Freedom by what William Nichols has called the voice of "the scrupulous historian." (150) who is attempting to extract some meaning from the still recent and terrifying past. Thus the voice is discernibly unlike the voice which closes the Narrative with "triumphant and heroic acceptance of his public duty." (DePietro, 385) Indeed, since the conventional nature of the slave narrative encouraged the rhetorical strategy of closing with triumph, the closing can be viewed as slightly suspect, implying a resolution which may not be possible in the abolitionist struggle and the continuing life of the writer.

In My Bondage and My Freedom, however, Douglass has no rigid conventions to frame his thought. He is at last in a position to do in a book what he had earlier yearned to do on the lecturer's platform. In his chapter on "Danger of Recapture" Douglass lays out very plainly the alternatives which faced him.

It did not entirely satisfy me to narrate wrongs; I felt like denouncing them. . . .I must speak just the word that seemed to me the word to be spoken by me. (My Bondage, 362)

Yet to do so would have limited his platform effectiveness for the abolitionist cause. Given the enlargement of Douglass's vision of society, it should not be surprising that form as it had constituted the Narrative would have no place in My Bondage and My Freedom, even though he was still compelled in some measure to tell the same tale of bondage he had so often recited as a speaker. In writing his second autobiography, Douglass found himself fracturing the earlier form in order to insert in the text his enlarged vision and commentary.

James Matlack has suggested that the material found in the Narrative is "stretched out and padded" (24) in My Bondage and My Freedom, and that "the form of autobiography has virtually disintegrated." (25) This seems unnecessarily rigid, given what is known of the slave narrative as form. The form that had "collapsed" was not that of autobiography, but that of the slave narrative as a genre. For Douglass, the autobiographical form was still evolving, still being discovered by the writer. The second text is simply not the same sort of autobiography as the first. Douglass had used the first text to establish his existence by means of a strongly conventionalized abolitionist document. In the second, he is more concerned with establishing his distance from the events of the Narrative in order to express and explore his understanding of them. He is seizing the authorial prerogative to analyze and comment outside of the rigid formal conventions originally permitted him by his white mentors and audience. Matlack, who views My Bondage is a "distinctly poorer literary

performance" (23) seems unwilling to allow for flexibility of form in autobiography, although he concedes that as a social and historical document the second text may actually be superior. Perhaps the fairest judgment to be made is that Douglass was simultaneously crippled and enabled by his departure from the slave narrative tradition. While he had moved beyond one form, he had not achieved a cohesive new form in his writing.

Douglass's assumption, in the second account, of the freedom to analyze and comment reveals him in a very different relation to his world than did the relative simplicity of the Narrative. As Franklin points out, Douglass by the end of the Narrative "has no doubt about his own humanity" (13) despite the fact that he had recently been considered a chattel piece of livestock, and had only more recently become able to challenge that belief. Matlack's contention that with the Narrative, where he believes Douglass was exercising "calculated control" (17) to heighten the impact of the document, the writer "jettisoned the obsessive preoccupation with his past life and freed himself for more ambitious work" (17) ought somehow to admit the possibility that the "more ambitious work" might be literary and revisionist at once. The lack of formal smoothness to the second autobiography ought, perhaps, to be seen as evidence of intellectual growth rather than as literary failure.

The argument for an interpretation of intellectual growth is supported by the fact that Douglass was reacting against the directive to "stick to the facts," that, in his own words, these arguments lay "ready and waiting" to be used against him, that he was adopting the

rhetorical style of sentiment and bombast to which his audience was most susceptible, and which, as Sundquist points out, is "virtually synonymous" with the language of the American Revolution.

Other strategies are also at work in My Bondage and My Freedom. Despite its balanced title, the book is not, as James Matlack would have it, a story in "contrasting halves." (14) Of the book's 406 pages (464 if we include the appendix), 334 are devoted to the period of time covered in the Narrative. The essential difference between these two treatments of the same period of the life lies in the enlarged context in which Douglass has come to perceive his material. He now writes from "a profound awareness of the self's role in society" (DePietro, 395) and an "understanding of class antagonism. . .that is merely implied in the world of the Narrative." (DePietro, 392)

Douglass's vision, in short, has become "sociological" (386) rather than spiritual: secularized, the text now presents the narrator in relation to the system of slavery which has replaced individuals as the enemy. In DePietro's reading, the "providentially ordered quest for physical freedom" (386) has been replaced by an "impassioned indictment of slavery as a system, not as a fiendish test of his individual will." (355) Thus, the account of Douglass's arrival in New York, which in the Narrative describes his presence "in the midst of thousands of my own brethren - children of a common Father," (111) is altered in My Bondage by the deletion of reference to the "common Father" and the insertion in the following paragraph of "For ten or fifteen years I had been dragging a heavy chain. . . cumbering my every motion." (336) This insertion is further augmented in Life and Times by mention of

"the clear consciousness of right and the plausible makeshifts of theology and superstition." (205)

Apparently, by the time he wrote his second text, Douglass was already beginning to position himself somewhere outside the religious commonplaces of the day. The nature of this shift in narrative stance makes the straightforward episodic line of the Narrative inappropriate to the writer's position. Because Douglass was establishing his credibility as a narrator with sufficient intellect and credibility to be responsible for the lines he wrote, or to be "in control of his own response to the events he describes," (Nichols, 150) he needed to violate the simplicity of the slave narrative. Thus, he obtains the freedom to intrude on his own text by inserting such statements as "I was probably awakened by the shrieks and piteous cries. . ." (My Bondage, 87) in place of "I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks." (Narrative, 21) He also provides, in My Bondage and in Life and Times, specific and lengthy explanations of the economic workings of the slave system and the manner in which the economics are manipulated to breed class antagonism (as between white and black workers); the nearly perfect isolation of the plantation is depicted explicitly as an explanation of the unaccountability of the slave holder to any moral code. The following passage appears at the end of a more detailed description.

In its isolation, seclusion and self-reliant independence, Col. Lloyd's plantation resembles what the baronial domains were, during the middle ages in Europe. Grim, cold, and unapproachable by all genial influences from communities without, there it stands; full three hundred years behind the age, in all that relates to humanity and morals.

This however, is not the only view that the place presents. Civilization is shut out. . . . Though separated from the rest of the world; though public opinion. . . seldom gets a chance to penetrate. . . it is. . . to outward seeming a most strikingly interesting place, full of life, activity, and spirit. . . ." (My Bondage, 63-4)

Douglass's keen understanding and apt medieval analogy reveal a grasp of the situation which the Narrative had not, as does the following passage, which appears in essentially the same form in My Bondage and Life and Times.

The difference between the white slave and the black slave is this: the latter belongs to one slaveholder, and the former belongs to all the slaveholders collectively. The white slave has taken from him, by indirection, what the black slave has taken from him directly, and without ceremony. Both are plundered, and by the same plunderers. The slave is robbed, by his master, of all his earnings, above what is required for his bare physical necessities; and the white man is robbed by the slave system, of the just results of his labor, because he is flung into competition with a class of laborers who work without wages. The competition, and its injurious consequences, will, one day, array the non-slaveholding white people of the slave states, against the slave system, and make them the most effective workers against the great evil. At present, the slaveholders blind them to this by keeping alive their prejudice against the slaves, as men - not as slaves. They appeal to their pride, often denouncing emancipation, as tending to place the white working man on an equality with negroes, and by this means, they succeed drawing off the minds of the poor whites from the real fact, that by the rich slave-master, they are already regarded as but a single remove from equality with the slave. The impression is cunningly made, that slavery is the only power that can prevent the laboring white man from falling to the level of the slave's poverty and degradation." (My Bondage, 310)

This sort of literary activity on Douglass's part was rebellious against the tyranny of form as well as against the effort of his white mentors to use him as their own text, offering his scarred back as a page to be explicated. No longer did Douglass allow himself to be introduced as a "graduate of that peculiar institution. . . with my diploma on my back." (Narrative, 158)

Even beyond his personal freedom, the central issue which occupied Douglass until emancipation was the abolition of slavery. If his own intellectual development and increasingly sophisticated grasp of the forces involved in the anti-slavery struggle caused a rift with the Garrisonians, this in no way lessened his dedication to the abolitionist cause. Given this fact, the imbalanced treatment of bondage and freedom in My Bondage makes a good deal of sense. Douglass's hatred of the slave system formed the central public concern of the man and his work. His initial abolitionist document, the Narrative, required expansion and commentary as the writer became in his own consciousness increasingly free and possessed of an increasingly complex understanding of the struggle in which he was involved. The terms of Douglass's participation, like his words, had to be acceptable to himself.

The verbatim inclusion in My Bondage of long sections of the Narrative text argues, as DePietro points out in his analysis of the two books, that Douglass wrote the second with the first before him, and that the alterations and emendations are significant. Douglass replaces the spiritual rhetoric of the Narrative in which he credits his escape to "a mixture of kind providence and his own initiative" (DePietro, 393) with a version in which his "freedom results only from his own intelligence. . . ." (DePietro, 393) Providence, in effect, has been replaced by "something like providence." (DePietro, 393)

DePietro's analysis of My Bondage and My Freedom concludes that the parts of the text which deal with Douglass's life after his escape detail for the reader his efforts to define a political voice by a

meticulous relation of his break with the Garrisonians and his efforts to start his own newspaper. It is probably an indication of Douglass' dedication to Abolition, and his sense of being consumed in that struggle, which lead Douglass to treat his period of freedom with relative brevity. Additionally, it may be suggested that his years of freedom constituted a continued effort on his part to understand the years of bondage, and that the evidence of this effort may be found in the heavy revision of his account of the slave years.

An interesting point is raised by Roger Rosenblatt, who writes that Each autobiographer tells us what a fictional character would not need to, that no further growth will occur. Each has chosen a point in his life where he could see a pattern of the whole. Having seen it, he isolates it and lays it to rest through the act of autobiography itself. (525)

Clearly, this is true of the Narrative, which ends with Douglass's assumption of the abolitionist task. In a sense, then, My Bondage serves as a sort of apostrophe to the Narrative, used by Douglass to reiterate and explicate the same set of events, in the voice of a thinker who has not yet found a pattern in the events themselves, who feels that his own life is still evolving. While he again concludes with acceptance of a heroic task, working for "complete emancipation of my entire race" (My Bondage, 406) the effect is not the same.

At the close of the Narrative there is a tone of certainty bordering on smugness, so secure is the author in his course of action;

From that time until now, I have been engaged in pleading the cause of my brethren - with what success and with what devotion, I leave those acquainted with my labors to decide." (120)

The words carry an irrefutable sense of completion,. The effect at the close of My Bondage is more tentative, as Douglass pledges to

continue the struggle as long as "my voice, my pen, or my vote" (406) can still be employed. The passive voice (perhaps politically calculated) admits the possibility that Douglass can be acted upon, as well as act. There is present a possibility of change in personal view point which is not present in the Narrative and which is consonant with Douglass's greater intellectual sophistication. If one accepts Arnold Krupat's statement that autobiography requires an egocentric individuality, a developed sense of historicism, and the act of writing (321) then it is possible to see My Bondage and My Freedom as displaying all three traits, whereas the Narrative displayed an individualism largely determined by the external forces of literary convention and abolitionist doctrine, and a vision involving almost no historical sense.

The close of Life and Times offers yet another vision of autobiographical closure. Here the text focuses, as did the two earlier volumes, on Douglass's public life, but for the first time the public dimension is named as such. Douglass cites his recent appointments as "crowning honors to my long public life." (620) In this third volume, the personal dimension or personal quest, which in the two earlier volumes was bound up in the public abolitionist mission, is missing. The treatment of the slave years is condensed by nearly 200 pages. Clearly, much of what Douglass did here was editorial rather than authorial work.

The reason for this, most probably, is that in the post-emancipation years, the ruling passion of Douglas's life, abolition, was no longer present. Having discovered in himself an alienation from blacks as a

group which bordered narrowly on anomie, Douglass had been unable to replace his abolitionist passion with another.

Certainly, he could not have been pleased by the post bellum condition of blacks in the United States, but the fire which had driven the younger man was gone. Douglass was left with his persistent need to analyze and comment, and even to document his presence in historic times. Hence, there are chapter dealing with "Secession and War," and "Hope for the Nation" as part of the pastiche of public addresses and reprints of newspaper and magazine articles which comprise the bulk of the text.

Of this third autobiography, DePietro writes

Gone are the economy and urgency of the Narrative; gone too the reason and complexity of My Bondage. Instead the elder Douglass embellishes the mythic elements of his life with the insertion of self-aggrandizing speeches and quotations from newspapers." (395)

Despite its apparent harshness, DePietro's assessment is hard to argue with. Certainly, Douglass's intent in this last autobiography is not the same as the intent which fueled the earlier volumes. The title does not even mention slavery, which had provided the encompassing motive of both the Narrative and My Bondage, both of which were pre-
emancipation efforts. The discursive collection of articles, speeches, and letters which form so much of the third text, giving it rather the air of a scrapbook, are reminiscent of the documentary apostrophes attached to the two earlier autobiographies. Although the material of the Narrative has been edited, in the Life and Times, to half the space it occupied in My Bondage, there is no corresponding enlargement of a narrative or analytical line to flesh out the remainder of the life.

while this may have been intended to demonstrate the extent to which Douglass had become an integral part of post bellum Union society, the public documents in fact seem to perform the more simple function of merely documenting the presence in the world of Frederick Douglass. What emerges is an autobiographical text which announces itself, by its title, as history; a text from which the presence of the author as voice or shaping presence is conspicuously absent. It is tempting to speculate on the meaning of this opaque third text; does it represent the elder Douglass's disillusioned refusal to reveal himself to a public for which he has now a degree of contempt? or his ultimate realization that the fusion of public and private selves is an illusion? It is, of course, impossible to tell with any certainty. Even at a remove of something over a century it remains difficult for a reader to reconcile the passion of the Narrative, or the impressive social analysis of My Bondage, with a third volume that runs heavily to dedication speeches and statements of opinion on Haitian food.

The fact remains, however, that Douglass was a masterful writer, and it is difficult to believe that he had lost the capacity to write well. It is at least possible that his real intention, since he was still impelled to objectify himself in print, was to present an autobiography as public document from which he had effectively removed himself in an effort to conclude with a formal autobiographical gesture, his public life. Or perhaps Douglass had finally arrived at a sense of the futility of explanation. If this is so, then his final abolitionist act was the simultaneous erasure of himself from the public domain and from the autobiographical text; an erasure concealed by the simulacrum

presented in the final "scrapbook" chapters of Life and Times.

What all this leads to, finally, is the fact that if the three Douglass autobiographies are read as linked efforts, with My Bondage and My Freedom serving as the mediating text between the Narrative and the Life and Times, the three trace the odyssey of Frederick Douglass in American society. The Narrative, with its stark and passionate line of narration, and its ringing resolution, is the product of an exceptional mind whose very literacy is an act of rebellion. It is the result of a skilled pouring of personal experience into a conventional form with such mastery that the form is transcended. My Bondage and My Freedom, which persistently analyzes and reviews the experience of the Narrative, is an attempt of that same mind, having grown in sophistication and intellectual scope, to understand and explain, to assign meaning to, the experience originally presented in the Narrative. It represents yet another assumption, on the part of Frederick Douglass, of a rebellious literate posture from which he can read the larger culture, and which enables him to reject the strictures of the earlier formal genre. The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, considered by many to be a literary failure, is the product of Douglass's manipulation of already existing texts. Almost paradoxically, it reveals Douglass grappling in old age with the considerable problem of documenting his place and presence in a world which had changed beneath his feet, virtually erasing the cause which had initially impelled him to literacy and to freedom.

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